Group-singing Traditions of Rajasthan's Braj[1]: A Preliminary Survey

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The Braj region of Rajasthan, broadly comprising, either wholly or in part, the districts of Bharatpur, Alwar, Dholpur, Dausa, and Sawai Madhopur, is exceptionally rich in forms of group-singing. These musical traditions are a counterpart of the tradition of popular poetry of north India, one typical expression of which flows through the competitive (*dangali*) format of Turra Kalangi or Lawni Dangal[2]. The group-singing also, accordingly, often takes a competitive form. A description of some forms of group-singing, competitive and other, is attempted in this brief survey, based on fieldwork from 1980 to 1991.

Sangeet Dangal

We may begin this survey with the fascinating and perhaps unique Sangeet Dangal, also known as Tala-bandi or Dhappali Raga, where we find common men singing compositions or *bandishes* set to ragas, usually under the expert guidance of a guru. Happily, Dangals involving a number of groups of singers are still taking place, and thousands still congregate to listen to the fare which is served.

Before coming to the composition or *cheez* proper, one or more of the following may form a sort of prelude:

i. solo playing of the Bam or big drum, at times accompanied by some smaller instruments;
ii. *alap*, which however is not of the *nom-tom* variety;
iii. recitation of independent couplets, often invocatory, addressed to Ganesha, Saraswati, etc.

Then follows the cheez, usually a Chhota-Khyal-type composition. The repertoire includes compositions by well-known musicians like Swami Haridas and 'Sanat Piya', of the Agra *gharana*, as well as compositions by local poets or the preceptor of a group. Compositions of the latter variety often deal with contemporary issues. Take, for example, the following lines rendered in a Dangal which took place in March 1991:

तीन सौ छप्पन की धमकी दीनी नरसिंह राव।
अडवानी जी अटल जी से मांगी यूं सुझाव ॥
अडवानी यूं गिरा उचारी, सुन लो भय्या अटल बिहारी।

ओ बिन मंदिर जनता में हमारी दिन दिन छवि घटे
मेरी यूं बिपता में रैन कटे ॥[3]

Often a composition may be inserted as an interlude in the course of rendering the main cheez. Thus, the group may sing:

भारत के कोने कोने में केवल एक ही नारा है,
. . . . ये कश्मीर हमारा है ॥[4]

in the midst of rendering Sanat Piya's

श्याम चलो हटो न करो न मोसे बतियां[5]

The rendering has the trappings of classical singing although the extent of virtuosity as well as fidelity and tunefulness varies, naturally, from group to group and from member to member within a group. Thus, a more accomplished group may resort to a more extensive alap, to *dugun* (singing in double tempo), to *bol-bant*, and to the rendering of *sargam* and even short *tans* in this unique and extremely interesting form. The traditions of Dhrupad-Dhamar and Haveli Sangeet will appear to mingle with that of Khayal-singing, with an overlay of the dramatic element, which is only natural given the public and group-singing aspects of the genre. Some influence of Qawwali-singing may also be discerned in the interjection of *sher*-type couplets from other poetic pieces.

The first item rendered by a group usually consists of a composition in praise of the goddess Amba, a strong favourite being the ever popular 'मेरी अम्बे, जगदम्बे महारानी'[6].

The Bam here plays a key role as an anchor. Besides setting the stage and establishing the rhythmic cycle, it keeps making an emphatic re-entry at the point of *sam* or emphasis each time the group returns to the *tek* or opening line of a composition. Apart from these interludes, regular rhythmic accompaniment is usually provided by a Dholak or, occasionally, a pair of Tablas.

The dangali or competitive element is present in Sangeet Dangal but in a rather mild form. Its presence is indicated by passages like the following:

या दंगल में आओ पल में,
बैठो उर में कर मंगलमय,
अष्टभुजा का रूप धारे,
प्रगटी धौलागढ़ में,
लज्जा राखो या दंगल में भवानी . . .[7]

Bam/Rasiya Dance

The Bam or Rasiya dance of Rajasthan's Braj, performed around the Holi festival, also revolves round the Bam or big drum but is more rustic and completely lacking in classical trappings. The performance consists of singing loosely-strung poetic passages, usually

featuring stories and episodes from the epics, to the intermittant accompaniment of the Bam, and dancing or waving of tassels. A typical sequence, corresponding to the rendering of one such poetic passage and consisting of the following five movements, may last for about two minutes and thirty (or less) seconds :

i. solo voice (group leader) giving the cue, no instruments;
ii. group-singing with smaller instruments such as the harmonium, Chimta, cymbals, Chheenpia and Dholak—one group sings, the other repeats;
iii. singing stops, solo voice gives cue; no instruments;
iv. group-singing with the smaller instruments and the Bam, reverting, towards the end, to the reciprocal pattern described at ii above;
v. singing ceases; the Bam and smaller instruments continue; end of cycle: cue for next passage.

The above observations are based on a performance—one of many such witnessed and recorded by me—at Deeg on 25 February 1980. In the fine performance of one of the groups there, the three successive cycles were devoted, in that order, to the travails of Raja Harishchandra, the abduction of Seeta by Ravana, and the trials of Nala. The musical handling of the first of these themes went as follows:

> Spoken, musical introduction by the leader. Group remains silent. No instruments. Then, group-singing to the accompaniment of the smaller instruments (no Bam):
>
> हे, काशी में बिक गए जायके
> तीनों के तीनों प्राणी (3) [8]
>
> Singing and instruments cease. The leader does the *uthan*—
>
> अरे तैने ही वा सतवादी का [9]
>
> —when the group joins with a cry along with the smaller instruments, and the Bam also pitches in at the sam or point of emphasis:
>
> डूबत जान उबारो . . . ऐ वहां . . . डूबत जान उबारो
> डूबत जान उबारो ऐ
> वहां
> त्रेता फंद करी है रघुबर से [10]
>
> This is sung four times; one group sings, the other repeats. Singing ceases. The Bam and other instruments continue. *Tihai*. End of cycle.

Some variations in matters of detail are of course possible. True to its genius, the form does not show much variety or sophistication. Its strength lies in its earthy gusto, picturesqueness, and the accompanying dancing—some of the finest that the Braj has to offer.

Hele ka Khyal

In terms of sophistication, the Hele ka Khyal lies in-between the Bam dance and the Sangeet Dangal. Unlike these two, it utilizes fairly long poetic narratives. Its excellence lies in close attention to and deft manipulation of rhythm, and the intermittant take-offs into the *tar saptak* consisting of sustained dalliance with the *tar sa* with a cry of 'ae-he-ho . . . sss'—a luminous, wistful pillar of pure, sonorous sound when at its best, from which cry or *hela* it derives its name. Unlike the Sangeet Dangal it is weak in *ragadari* but strong in *layakari*. Unlike the Bam dance, there is no dancing, though there is a lot of vigorous gesticulation and tala-keeping. As compared to the Bam dance, it is also more sophisticated and leader- or guru-oriented, the guru also often being the poet-composer. The dangali or competitive aspect in Hele ka Khyal is much more manifest that in Sangeet Dangal. This can, at times, lead to much heartburning as well as cheap diatribe.

A segment or cycle of a rendering of the 'Khyal of Mordhwaj'—one of the finest performances of Hele ka Khyal witnessed by me—recorded at Udai Kalan, near Gangapur city, on 26 February 1980 runs as follows:

In slow tempo, twice:

तीनों प्राणी चले पहुंच गए मोरध्वज नगरी में जाए
खड़े हो जाए द्वार पे ढौढीवान के पै निगाय
हाथ जोड़ कर बड़ा अगाड़ी चरणों में दिया शीश नवाय
फर्माओ, बतलाओ, समझाओ क्या इच्छा तुम्हारी रे
सुनाओ स्वामी सेवक को ऽ ऽ ऽ

In double tempo twice:

ढौढीवान की सुनकर बतियां बोले साधूजी
थोड़ा सा काम कर दो हमारे भय्या जी (2)
अरे जाकर के राजा को तुम इतनी बात सुना दो
पास हमारे आवै ये समाचार पहुंचा दो

अरे दो साधू इक सिंह साथ में आए द्वार पे (2)
अरे देर करै मत लाला जा तू
अरे लौट नहीं जायें हम बन को ऽ ऽ ऽ

अरे सुनकर ढौढीवान जाय राजा सूं ऐसे कह दीनो
अरे आये संत द्वार दो स्वामी सिंह साथ में सज लीनो
अरे इक साधू को काम ये कर लो तुमको नाथ बुला लीनो
कह दीनो, भर लीनों, हो रीनो नाराज वो भारी रे
संतन को कर लो दर्शन उनको ऽ ऽ ऽ ऽ

अरे सुनकर राजा आए द्वार पे दरस किया संतन को ऽ ऽ ऽ ऽ (twice)

Four times with accelerated tempo:

नृप भारी मन में हरषाए
चरनन दीनों शीश नवाए
रहा संतन को बचन सुनाए
काम कुछ बतला दे मुझको ऽ ऽ ऽ

नि सा ग म प ग म प़ सा ग नि सा,
ग म रे सा नि ध प म ग रे सा,
ग म प म ग रे सा, ग रे सा,
ग म प नि सा (thrice, tihai)[11]

The underlined portions indicate take-offs for the hela. While the accompaniment by the smaller instruments is constant, the Bam-interludes coincide with the take-off points except for the final crescendo, in a faster tempo, in which the Bam has a greater role to play. The Bam also plays a major role in the instrumental prelude, unaccompanied by singing and with quickened tempo towards the end, with which a group starts its performance. This instrumental prelude is also, at times, accompanied by dancing.

'Kanhaiyya'/'Geet' Action-song

The 'Kanhaiyya' or 'Geet' action-song of the Minas, Gujars, Malis, etc., is the least formal and the most elemental of the forms so far described. Correspondingly, instruments play the least role in it. Similarly, both ragadari and layakari take a back seat. The important thing here is raw, sonorous gusto and community participation in which the full force and personality of a tribe comes to the fore. In fact, it is less of formal singing and more of chanting, often recalling the recitation of mantras, with typical cadences and the ebbing and flowing of sound.

In keeping with its character, the musical structuring of the 'Kanhaiyya' is fairly loose and flexible though a general pattern or patterns may be discerned. The poetic subject-matter consists of connected narratives as is also the case with the Hele ka Khyal and Jikri Bhajans. Two or more lines of a narrative are taken up at a time and each spurt or cycle is preceded by a pause. Each cycle consists, essentially, of three movements. First, there is a trilled (ऐ ऽ ऽ ऽ etc.) uthan by the *media* or leader. At times there may be two medias and there may also be a spoken introduction, corresponding to the role played by the *gaha* in Jikri. Next, there is the *jhelna* by a core or smaller group, sometimes divided into two subgroups for the sake of convenience. The core groups sings a couplet or two in a different tune and in singsong style to the accompaniment of the Dholak. The end is often long-drawn-out. Finally, the media again gives the cue, and the larger group forming a circle or ellipse or semicircle around the media and the core group also pitches in, to the

accompaniment, usually, of a Ghera or giant Chang, and with orchestrated movements such as swaying back and forth or from side to side or skipping. There is no particular tala or rhythm-cycle but a loose 1-2, 1-2, or 1-2-3-4 pattern, synchronizing with alternating vocal emphasis (so suggestive of the chanting of mantras or *shlokas*) may be discerned. Each such movement ends either in a diminishing cadence or an abrupt, crisp end. However, as already mentioned, the musical structuring of this form is flexible and variations are quite possible.

By way of illustration, we may take the following excerpts from the performance of a song about the birth of Dev Narainji by a group of Gujars of Mondagaon village at Weir in Bharatpur district on 27 December 1991:

Spoken introduction by the two leaders or medias in collaboration with each other:

कैसे कई है भय्या . . . ऐसे कई है[12], etc.

Following the lead given by one of the leaders, the smaller group continues in a singsong style, in a *chalat* tune (usually to the accompaniment of a Dholak—not used, however, in this case) :

स्याई गई सुफेदी आ गई
डगमग नार हले प्यारे,
अस्सी बरस की उमर हमारी,
कहाते होय कुंवर वारे ऽ ऽ ऽ
भोजा रावत संग छोड़ गए लगी है जिगर में फांसी रे,
नत बोले नावा बोल करैगो जग हांसी रे ऽ ऽ ऽ[13] (long-drawn-out ending)

Then, one of the leaders gives the cue—

छायौ रूप ताल मदरे पे

—when with a mighty 'हुइका' the larger group joins in:

दिन ऊगत परभात पहुंच गई चौपारि के दगरे पे,
सूदी गैल ताल पै जाये समंद हिलोरा खावै
गदरे ताल पे तिरलौकी रूपक जब छावै (abrupt, brisk ending)

Thus ends one spurt or cycle. After a breather, the next one follows:

Spoken introduction.

Leader and smaller or core group:

नावा बोले जब साड़ो ते,
सुपने की मेरी बात भली,
कुशा फूटि कै बेलबढ़ी है
खिली कमल की कली कली सागर में ऽ ऽ ऽ (long-drawn-out ending)

Leader:

सागर में चल दिया पुष्प सरकतो . . .

Then the larger group:

. . . साड़ो माऊ आवै रे
ले लिया गोद में हिवरा से लिपटावै रे (long-drawn-out ending)

The raw material which has been utilized to give form to the 'Kanhaiyya' can be seen in forms like the Gujar Goth—the collective, chant-like singing by groups of Gujar men and women. Here we come across the very same characteristics—trilling, use of *gitkaris*, special voice-production, basing the sound in the belly, intermittant vocal emphasis, revelling in cadences and sustained notes, etc.—which mark the singing of 'Kanhaiyya' songs, minus of course the distinctive and gusty gesticulations and movements which make the presentation of the latter unique.

Jikri Bhajan

Lastly, we may notice the Jikri Bhajan singing in which the lead singer is joined and supported by a small number of co-singers who form the *agari* and *pichhadi jots* or teams. The Jikri along with its cousins like the Rangatiya and Samvadi Bhajans is a composite form employing many *chhandas* (metres) and *dhuns* (tunes). Thus, the basic *tek-chowk-tod-tek* pattern may be enlarged and embellished by the insertion, variously, of chhandas/tunes such as Jhad, Lawni, Alha, Bahr-e-tawil, Gaha, Sakhi, Doha, Chaupai, Dhola, Maraithi, Haryanvi, and so on. Besides, it employs the distinctive flights into the tar saptak in a manner reminiscent of the Hele ka Khyal. The dangali or competitive format applies to with this form too. At its best, the Jikri form and singing represent capable poetry wedded to consummate singing but, like much else in the realm of folk music, it too is tending to get diluted and 'vulgarized'. Incidentally, this evolved form has to be distinguished from the Jikri or Jakdi Bhajans found in various other parts of Rajasthan and dealt with, *inter alia*, by Manohar Sharma in his learned article in *Varada* (Vol. 16, No. 3, July–September 1973).

On 13 March 1984, I had the pleasure and privilege of recording a Jikri performance by Shri Shyam Lal, that master performer from Sinsini, Bharatpur district, and his group A cycle from a Jikri about Harishchandra-Taramati went as follows (after the tek):

JHAD

Leader :

अरे कई रानी ने रोय, कुमर तू मोय सुना दे बैना,
रे तेरी मय्या रोवै लाल खोल दे नैना[14]

Group joins:

अरे . . . तो बिन छौना कुमर, बंधे ना सबर लाड़ले मोकूं,
कहां लियो नाग नै खाय कन्हय्या बेटा तोकूं
कन्हय्या बेटा तोकूं, अरे कन्हय्या बेटा तोकूं, रे कहां
तो ऽ ऽ ऽ कूं।

CHOWK

Leader:

अरे . . . निक होश कुमर को आयौ (2)

Group joins:

अरे माता से वचन सुनायौ

Leader:

अरे अब माता है रह्यो अंत हमारो

Group joins:

अरे तुम दिल में धीरज धारो
तुम दिल में, तुम दिल में धीरज धारो।

DHOLA

Leader:

अरे सबर दिल में माता कर लै री
जहर तो रहय्यो तन पे छाय

Group:

अरे पड़ी रे आज कुमर पे दीजो . . . (?) गिराय

Leader:

अरे झाग मौड़े पे सुत के गए रे जहर के आय

Group:

अरे हाल लखकै सुत के
तारा रही है घबराय
रानी रही है गय्या सी डकराय
आधी धोती फाड़ नार ने कफन कर दीनो उढ़ाय

MARAITHI

Leader

अरे लै मालिन की मदद सीस पे
सुत को धरकर चल दीनी

Group:

हाय हाय डकराय गैल
मरघट की तारा गह लीनी

Leader:

लास लई मरघट में आई
. . . . (?) आग जलाई है (?)

Group:

चपरासी ने आस पास में
अब से गिरा सुनाई है

HARYANVI:

Leader:

अरे प्राणनाथ सुत मरो आपको
याकौ तनिक निहारो
कर, कप्पन नहीं मो पे पिया
तुम मन में दया विचारो

Group:

घड़ा उचावे की सुन कामिनि
मन में बात उचारो
हुकुम बजाऊं मैं मालिक को
यही है सत्य हमारो

UDAN AND DAUR
(wording not very clear)

Leader:

मुनि ने शब्द उचारौ है

Group:

ल्हास से खून निकारौ है

Leader:

नार तैनै खून लजायौ है

Group:

नार तैने . . .

Leader, in dugun (double tempo):

ए नार . . . लजायो . . .

Group joins to end in a brilliant, fast crescendo:

अरे मुनि . . .

Just as the music of the professional communities is the special glory of western Rajasthan, group-singing, often quite accomplished, by non-professionals is that of north-eastern Rajasthan. Like much else that is endangered in the realm of folk music, these forms also face debasement and/or extinction. There is a great and urgent need to encourage and conserve these forms particularly because they are, usually, unsuitable for the glamorized urban stage and have to be nurtured in their own nursery, the villages and small towns.

What has been attempted here is only a brief and tentative broaching of the subject. Detailed and systematic research and analysis are a desideratum and are likely to be found very rewarding.

NOTES

1. Braj is a major cultural region of north-central India, including parts of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana. The present survey is confined to the part of Braj falling in Rajasthan.

2. The Turra Kalangi, or Lawni Dangal, is a public performance of popular poetry by competing groups; the performance is accompanied by percussion (on the Daf). While a description of this performance would not be out of place here, I reserve the topic for fuller treatment in a subsequent article in *Sangeet Natak*.

3. The allusion is to the dispute over the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, which was hotting up at that time. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, and like-minded organizations had been campaigning vigorously for a temple to Ram on the site of the mosque, which was therefore in danger. Responding to a question in Parliament as to what the Union Government (a Congress government headed by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao) intended to do to protect the mosque in Ayodhya (in the state of Uttar Pradesh, then under BJP rule), the then Union Home Minister S.B. Chavan had stated that if the Government of Uttar Pradesh failed to protect the "disputed structure", the Union Government would not hesitate to impose President's Rule in the state by using Article 356 of the Indian Constitution.

   This composition in a humorous vein refers to the supposed discomfiture of the then BJP President L.K. Advani, who was leading the campaign for the Ram temple, at the 'threat' of Article 356 given by the Union Government. A rough translation would be: '[When] Narasimha Rao gave the threat of [using Article] three fifty-six/Advaniji asked for Atalji's [Atal Behari Vajpayee, senior BJP leader and present Prime Minister of India] advice/[saying] Listen brother Atal Behari/Without the temple our public image is waning every day/Filling my nights with worry.'

   Eventually, Article 356 was invoked putting Uttar Pradesh under President's Rule only after the Babri Masjid was destroyed on 6 December 1992. The campaign for a Ram temple on its site continues.—*Ed.*

4. 'The cry/slogan rings out loud and clear in every corner of India . . . Kashmir belongs to us.'

5. In the opening line of this composition a woman wooed by Krishna tenderly admonishes him for his

faithlessness: 'Begone, Krishna, I won't have any more of your beguiling love-talk.'

6. 'My Ambe, O mother of the universe, queen-empress [I pay homage to thee].'

7. 'O mother-goddess, O Bhawani, who manifested at Dhaulagarh in your [omnipotent] eight-handed form, come to this contest straightaway, fill our hearts with your auspicious presence, help save our honour, give us victory.'

8. King Harishchandra of Ayodhya epitomizes truthfulness and munificence in mythology. The allusion here is to the king's selling himself, his wife, and his son into slavery at Kashi (Varanasi) in order to give *dakshina* (fee payable to a teacher or holy man for his services) to sage Vishwamitra who was putting the king's reputation to test.

9,10. The context remains the same: 'And it is you [O Lord] who came to the succour of the truthful [Harishchandra] when Treta had played foul with him.' Treta is the second of the four ages into which each cycle of creation is divided according to the Hindu conception.

11. Like Harishchandra, King Mordhwaj is a role model held up by folklore and mythology. He is the ideal host, boundless in his concern for guests and prepared to go to extreme lengths to carry out their bidding. But his generosity too is put to test. Three persons, two of them disguised as holy men and the third as a lion, go to the king's palace, where the 'holy men' demand that the king and the queen saw down their son in order to feed the lion—a precondition to their accepting any food or drink. The fable recalls that of King Shibi who gave his own flesh to save a dove which had sought refuge with him.

12. 'How has it been told, brother?' 'Thus it has been told.'

13. This and the subsequent excerpts from this particular performance of 'Kanhaiyya' refer to the supernatural 'birth' of Dev Narainji who is worshipped as a divine incarnation by the Gujar community. Dev Narainji is supposed to have been 'born' to Sadhu (or Sado), the widow of Bhoj (the most illustrious of the twenty-four Bagrawat brothers, the sons of Bagha), through the metamorphosis of a beetle which emerged from a lotus flower. Nawa (or Newa) mentioned in the exceprts was the younger brother of Bhoj.

14. This and the excerpts which follow also refer to the travails of King Harishchandra. The king has sold himself to a Dom who presides over a cremation ground. The duties involve taking half the shroud on a dead body by way of tax. The queen and the prince have similarly been sold to a teacher. The prince dies of snakebite and in a moving scene the king demands half the shroud from his own wife who has just managed to cover the body of their son with half of the only sari she possessed.